Culture
Book Reviews

An Israeli flag flies next to the rubble of destroyed buildings Dec. 26, 2023, as smoke rises in the Gaza Strip, as seen from southern Israel, amid the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian militant group Hamas. (OSV News/Reuters/Violeta Santos Moura)

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Ever since Hamas launched its pogrom against Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, and the subsequent brutality of urban warfare in Gaza, there have been many casualties on both sides of the conflict. The death of innocent civilians is always the most dreadful calamity of war, but the dashing of hopes for peace is a close second.

In this war, many fear a third calamity: A loss of the progress made in Catholic-Jewish relations since the Second Vatican Council's seminal document *Nostra Aetate* officially repudiated antisemitism and reminded Catholics that Jews are, as Pope John Paul II said, "our elder brothers." The Polish pope's historic visit to the Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp in 1979 was the first of many achievements in Jewish-Catholic dialogue.

John Paul's successor, Pope Benedict XVI, delivered what may have been his most penetrating sermon when he visited Auschwitz in 2006. "Deep down, those vicious [Nazi] criminals, by wiping out this people, wanted to kill the God who called Abraham, who spoke on Sinai and laid down principles to serve as a guide for mankind, principles that are eternally valid," the German pope said. "If this people, by its very existence, was a witness to the God who spoke to humanity and took us to himself, then that God finally had to die and power had to belong to man alone — to those men, who thought that by force they had made themselves masters of the world." These words touched Jewish hearts profoundly.

Stress Test: The Israel-Hamas War and Christian-Jewish Relations is a collection of essays by American Christians who have been engaged in the dialogue between Christians and Jews in recent years and who bring not only their scholarly research to the subject, but a depth of understanding gained in years of personal dialogue and friendship with their Jewish counterparts. All recognize that the pain and suffering witnessed in the past 18 months has the potential to upend peace efforts and limit fraternal dialogue.

"Christians call this land holy; Israelis and Palestinians call it theirs; and geopolitical experts call it disputed," notes Stockton University's Carol Rittner, one of the book's editors. "The situation is complicated for sure." She notes that Catholics and Jews

have discussed other disputed questions, especially "the historical impact of Christianity and the Christian churches on the Jewish people and on the Holocaust, but we seem reluctant to discuss with the same vigor the impact of the current Israel-Hamas war on Christian-Jewish relations." History, even the most brutal history, is less dangerous because it is in the past, if the past is ever really past.

Rittner's essay acknowledges the limits of dialogue, even while insisting on its value. "Christian-Jewish dialogue is not a fire brigade that can be called upon to put out a conflagration, like a war," she writes, "but Christian-Jewish dialogue can help to build the trust that is required for joint action to relieve suffering." Like all the essays in the book, Rittner's does not dismiss the suffering brought to the people in Israel or Gaza by this war. There is no whitewashing of war's evil.

John Pawlikowski, of the Catholic Theological Union, offers an important historical analysis, tracing the role of the fathers of the early Church in crafting the narrative that the Jews were no longer entitled to a homeland, a view that persisted into the 20th century. He examines the different starting points for analysis of the war. "For Jews, there is a solemn responsibility for physical survival and for many, if not most, survival of the State of Israel as a locale of God's redemptive action," he notes. "For many Catholics, *just war theory* serves as a governing paradigm." Each of those positions has many divergent interpretations as well. Wading through such differences is not easy.

St. Joseph's University professor Phillip Cunningham picks up similar themes and offers an especially fine explanation of how Catholic understandings of God's covenant with the Jews have evolved, and how they remain problematic. Yes, God's biblical promise of a land grant is irrevocable. "But it does not follow that such a promise can be actualized in 2024 and beyond simply by plopping culturally conditioned ideas about divinely anointed monarchs and land grants on top of the multireligious, multinational, and volatile Middle East or onto the democracy that the State of Israel defines itself to be." Cunningham neatly balances his obvious commitment to the safety and security of Israel, with the searching questions posed by just war theory about Israel's conduct of the war in Gaza.

Union Theological Seminary professor Mary Boys offers a somewhat depressing account of how students and faculty responded to the Israel-Hamas conflict. A resolution before the student senate stated: "Resolved, that the students of Union Theological Seminary condemn the actions by Hamas, and by any individuals or groups affiliated with or acting in support of Hamas, on October 7, 2023." That resolution failed by a vote of 30-1. Conversely, the faculty at Union, acknowledging differences of opinion among the faculty, issued a resolution that took a more balanced approach to the war.

Villanova theologian Massimo Faggioli pointed out in his essay that in the West, the Shoah has taken a central place in our narrative of cultural and political development, but that in much of the global South, that centrality is not acknowledged or even understood. He also persuasively argues that Catholic higher education has a specific vocation "to address twenty-first century upheaval that the Israel-Hamas war has increased and intensified."

Michael Azar of the University of Scranton accuses Christian-Jewish dialogue of being one-sided, and thinks the war has exposed that bias. His commentary reads more like a manifesto than an essay. "The Israel-Hamas war demands that Christian-Jewish relations' historic and immoral tendency to ignore or oppress the Palestinian plight must change," he writes. His account of early Christian responses to the Shoah and the founding of Israel is tendentious, ignoring the presence of large numbers of Jews in what would become Israel before the Shoah. Azar fails to note that the late 1940s and early 1950 witnessed large-scale displacements of Jews and Palestinians throughout the region, as Jews were expelled from Arab countries where they had lived for centuries just as some Palestinians were expelled from towns within the borders of the new Jewish state.

Peter Petitt is a Lutheran pastor who has worked on Christian-Jewish dialogues, and he traces what he sees as the opposite bias within his own denomination in recent years, the tendency to make pronouncements about the Israel-Palestinian conflict without any meaningful input from Israelis. He laments the evaporation of a centrist position that emerged in the last quarter of the 20th century but collapsed in "the long decade from late 1995 into early 2006, bracketed by the assassination of the Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and the election victory of Hamas in the Palestinian Authority's Legislative Council." More extreme politics emerged in both Israel and among Palestinians, and continue to make hopes for peace seem forlorn.

There are other, insightful chapters in this important volume. The dominant theme is that all the progress made in Christian-Jewish dialogue must find the resources of empathy and intellect to navigate the current stress test posed by the war. Conflicting opinions about the war exist and can't be ignored. The Christian belief in the dignity of all persons cannot be set aside, nor can the fact that we share a common scriptural patrimony. This book does not offer specific answers because such answers can only emerge from dialogue. It shines a light on the problem and offers useful ideas to guide that dialogue. At present, that may be all that is possible.